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Navigating Family Transitions: Evidence from the General Social Survey

2006

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Symbols

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.	not available for any reference period
..	not available for a specific reference period
...	not applicable
0	true zero or a value rounded to zero
0^s	value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
^{p}	preliminary
^{r}	revised
x	suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
^{E}	use with caution
F	too unreliable to be published

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Navigating family transitions: evidence from the General Social Survey

Introduction

Over the past few decades, important social, economic and demographic changes have transformed the lives of Canadians: the decline and control of fertility, the legalization of divorce, an increase in common-law unions, and the entry of women in huge numbers into the labour market. Each in turn, these transformations have been studied in order to assess their magnitude and their consequences on the family environment.

Five years ago when the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) collected data on Canadian families, it's major findings showed that compared to previous years, divorce was on the rise, common law unions were more prevalent and marriage seemed to be losing ground. Despite these changes, the vast majority of Canadians continue to enter a common-law union or a marriage. The rise in divorce and separation, however, means that families look different now than they did in the past, with more stepfamilies and lone-parent families than before (Statistics Canada, 2002a).

In addition to the changing structure of families, several trends have recently come to light that may have important consequences for Canadian families. For example, the growing need for higher educational attainment and the increasing cost of post-secondary education pose challenges for young adults entering a union. First marriages are happening later, on average, and young families are waiting longer before having their first child (Statistics Canada, 2004a). In addition, more and more families are relying on two incomes for financial security, and are juggling the responsibilities of paid work, domestic work and childcare (Marshall, 2006).

Given these changes and trends, the 2006 GSS addressed the question of how young Canadian families are negotiating key transitions which have significant impacts on the early years of family life. The nature and timing of transitions such as the establishment and advancing of a career, moving out of the parental home, marriage or common-law union, accumulating assets such as a car or house, family formation and the dissolution of a common-law union or marriage, may be changing as the Canadian economic and social context changes. In addition, the survey explores the kinds of resources young families need and use as they move through these important family transitions.

This report focuses on two of these key transitions. First, it analyzes the experiences of respondents who have had or adopted a child in the five years prior to the survey, and second, it examines the experiences of those who have gone through a separation or divorce during that same period. For both transitions, the analysis provides a brief description of those who experienced the change, then explores the services and resources that were used to help families as they moved through these transitions.

Box 1

2006 General Social Survey – Family Transitions (Cycle 20)

Data presented in this study are taken from the General Social Survey (GSS). From June to October 2006, 23,608 people aged 15 or older and living in a private household in one of Canada's 10 provinces were interviewed. Respondents contacted by the GSS were interviewed by telephone and mainly chosen by a random digit dialing sampling method. The study collected detailed data on various aspects of the family, namely the transitions experienced by respondents: leaving the parental home, marrying or entering into a common-law union, having children, moving or buying a home, and separating or getting divorced. The study also addressed important topics about the family, such as assistance and care provided to relatives, as well as work-family balance. The response rate was 68%.

Section 1: Navigating the birth or adoption of a child

Since the early 1960s, a decline has been observed in the number of children that families tend to have. This decline stems from many social and economic changes that are generating a new context: generalized education, secularization, availability of contraception, the declining popularity of marriage, increased conjugal instability, women's increased participation in the labour market. From then on, it was the time of the "nuclear" family, sometimes broken, step or blended where wanting a child became more of a concerted choice. Women's professional lives have ceased to be a short-term activity preceding marriage and maternity. Often, difficult choices must be made between starting a family and pursuing an enriching career. Despite these concerns, almost all couples continue to embrace parenthood.

Becoming a parent is a big step that dramatically changes one's life. Whether it involves a birth or an adoption, this event is accompanied by significant sources of stress and a number of administrative undertakings. How much time does a parent have to care for the child? What steps must be taken with their employer? What opportunities for leave do parents have to allow them to spend more time with the child?

The idea that balancing work and family involves men as much as it does women in the labour market has gained ground. New measures have been designed to help safeguard the parental experience. During the last decade, numerous measures were implemented to allow prospective working parents to rearrange their work schedules and establish an environment conducive to the arrival of a child: Maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, or other leave.

This section focuses on persons who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006. This group has elicited growing interest given the increased participation of mothers in the workforce who have young children and the fact that fertility is stabilized at a relatively low level. This section will shed light on programs and services dispensed by various governmental and institutional authorities and put in place to support the parental experience. First, it will examine the use of formal support services related to the arrival of a child. What is the profile of parents receiving formal support services? What services do the parents use and were these services useful?

Next, it will look at whether or not parents take leave from work for a pregnancy or adoption. Are men and women likely to have equal access to parental leave? Do parents stay home longer to take care of their young children? In sum, various personal and family characteristics will be examined.

Box 2

This document focuses on respondents who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006. Since data collection ended in October 2006, only births and adoptions that occurred between January and October 2006 were captured by the GSS. Thus, the data for the year 2006 represent only a fraction of the events for that year. Respondents in their reproductive years (that is, between the ages of 15 and 49 years) when they had or adopted their (youngest) child were included. The sample consists of 2,708 people.

Definitions

Adopted child: Child for whom the respondent signed legal documents giving him/her the authority to raise the child as his/her own. In the context of the GSS, stepchildren who were adopted are considered as stepchildren.

Birth child: Son or daughter of the respondent related by blood; natural child.

Over 3 million persons have experienced a birth or an adoption between 2001 and 2006

During the 1990s, the number of births declined from year to year in Canada. This reduction in births is partly due to an aging population as the large baby boom generations gradually move beyond their reproductive years. The drop is also due to changes in the fertility behaviours of the Canadian population. For several years now, similar to what we have observed in many industrialized countries, the fertility of Canada's women has been delayed: the average age of women giving birth is increasing, having reached 29.7 years in 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2006). The fertility of young women (under the age of 30) is decreasing, whereas that of women aged 30 or older is slightly on the rise (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2005). These statistics show that women tend to finish their schooling and establish themselves in the labour market before raising children.

Since the third millennium, however, the number of births is on the rise in Canada. A few factors could explain this slight increase: the timely impact of new policies to help families and the number of women at an age of peak fertility. The change in the age structure does, in fact, favour a slight increase in the number of births. While the size of the 20 to 24 and 35 to 39 age groups is decreasing, the 25 to 34 age group (where two-thirds of births occur) has been increasing for a few years.

According to recent General Social Survey (GSS) data on Family Transitions (Cycle 20), over 3.2 million[1] parents aged 15 or over had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006. This proportion represents 12% of the Canadian population. For nearly 40% of these parents, this was their first experience of parenthood. For others, the period from 2001 to 2006 proved to be important in fulfilling their fertility intentions: 31% had had or adopted more than one child.

From 2001 to 2006, more than 9 out of 10 children were born or adopted into a union. For the majority of provinces, marriage was the most common type of union in which to have or adopt a child. Not surprisingly, Quebec is the exception: according to the GSS, more than half of these children (53%) were born or adopted into a common-law union whereas elswhere in Canada, this was the case for only 12% of the children (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2005).

The use of formal support services during a pregnancy or after the birth or adoption of a child has increased since 2001

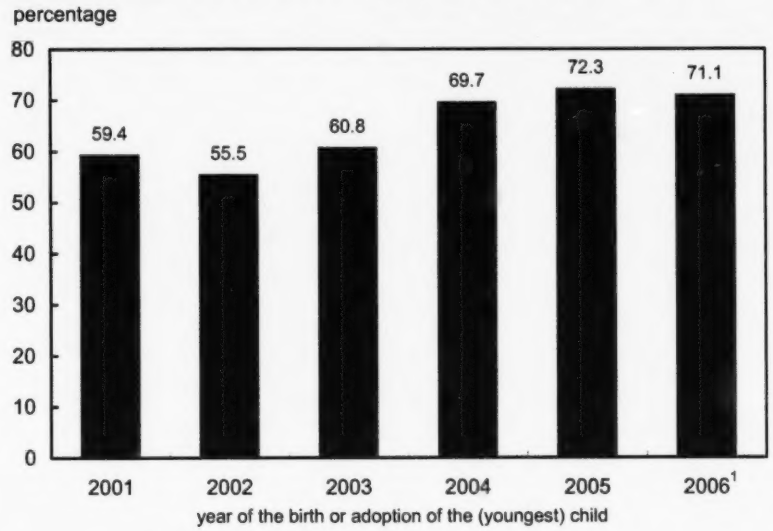
Even if today's parents are increasingly inundated with information about the arrival of a child, parents want what is best for their children to give them the best possible start in life. A variety of services and information, whose central objective is to help with the child's development, is offered to parents. There are pre-natal services designed to help parents prepare, increase well-being through the pregnancy, and adapt to the child's arrival. Other services aim to support families upon the arrival of a new child (birth or adoption).

Services dispensed during pregnancy or after the birth or adoption of the child which were examined in the context of the GSS include: parenting skills (pre-natal courses, mother's support groups, public health nurses, etc.), nutrition information for the mother or the child, breastfeeding (La Lèche League, lactation consultant, volunteer from a breastfeeding support group) and home care (meal preparation, laundry, house cleaning or shopping). These formal support services are provided by either a health professional, a community-based service worker, or a support group which includes the services of a doctor, social worker, psychologist, public health nurse or midwife.

Among persons who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006, 66% received at least one type of formal service or support. The proportion of parents who indicated having received some formal support increased from 59% in 2001 to 71% in 2006. According to data from the GSS, 9 out of 10 persons who received such services rated the help received as useful.

1. Nearly all children were birth children.

Chart 1
Since 2001, parents are increasingly using formal support services during a pregnancy or after the birth or the adoption of a child



1. Births and adoptions that occurred between January and October 2006.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

So, which services do parents call upon during their parental experience? Parents who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006 considered nutrition for the health of the mother and child to be very important. Approximately 48% of parents requested services related to breastfeeding, with almost as many asking to be informed regarding nutrition (44%). Mothers and fathers were, however, much less likely to receive home care assistance.

Table 1
Parents consider nutrition for the health of the mother and child very important

Formal support services received during pregnancy or after the birth or adoption[1]	percent
Breastfeeding	47.6
Nutrition information	44.4
Parenting skills	38.6
Home care	6.7

1. Includes persons who reported having received that type of support service.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Parents with more education as well as first-time parents are more likely to have sought formal support services

Of course, the profile of parents requesting formal support services depends upon the eligibility criteria of services offered, which vary from province to province. In addition to this are the particular needs expressed by some families.

According to the GSS, the use of formal support services generally declines with age. The younger a person is when having or adopting a child, the more likely that person is to seek out formal support services. However, the distribution of people who requested breastfeeding services according to their age at the time of the child's birth is much more uniform: up to age 39, nearly half of parents had used breastfeeding services. Use of this type of service is less frequent among people who experienced parenthood in their forties (about 44 %).

Moreover, use of formal support services differs according to whether a person is a first-time parent or not. Among persons who were first-time parents, more than 80% requested some type of formal support service. The corresponding proportion for parents who were having or adopting their second or third child was 55%. This may be because parents who are having or adopting another child are much more informed and comfortable regarding the parental and administrative undertakings involved. The type of formal support service used does not differ between first-time parents and those having one or more children.

The GSS shows that more educated persons are more numerous in seeking out formal support services: among parents who had a partial or completed post-secondary education, more than two-thirds used formal services or supports. Those who had a high school diploma or who had only partial primary or secondary schooling were less likely to call upon formal services or supports.

Many parents report not requesting formal support services during pregnancy or after the birth or adoption because they maintain that they did not need any help

For service providers and decision-makers who focus on the well-being of families, it is interesting to know the reasons why some parents do not make use of available services or support. As previously mentioned, nearly one-third of parents who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006 did not make use of any type of formal support service during pregnancy or sometime after the birth or adoption of the child

Firstly, 18% of parents indicated that they did not know that these support services existed. This proportion varies very little across provinces; only the Prairies show a slightly higher proportion (23%). On the other hand, among persons who were aware of the formal support programs and services, 66% did not use the services simply because they did not feel the need for them. Families may seek solutions within their own network, particularly with relatives or other people who have the same concerns. Across the country, residents of the Atlantic region (72%) were most likely to report that they did not seek out formal support services because they did not need them. Their counterparts in the Prairies (56%) were the least likely to cite this reason.

Box 3

Parental benefits programs in Canada

As a general rule, national policies include a period of leave for parents with the right to reintegrate into their former job as well as various amounts of entitlements to replace income. These benefits enable parents to take time off from work following the birth, and more recently, following the adoption of a child. The 1980s and 1990s saw the more widespread introduction of parental leaves that are added to existing maternity leaves. Interest in these new provisions stems from the fact that they support gender equality while also creating alternatives to child care services outside the home.

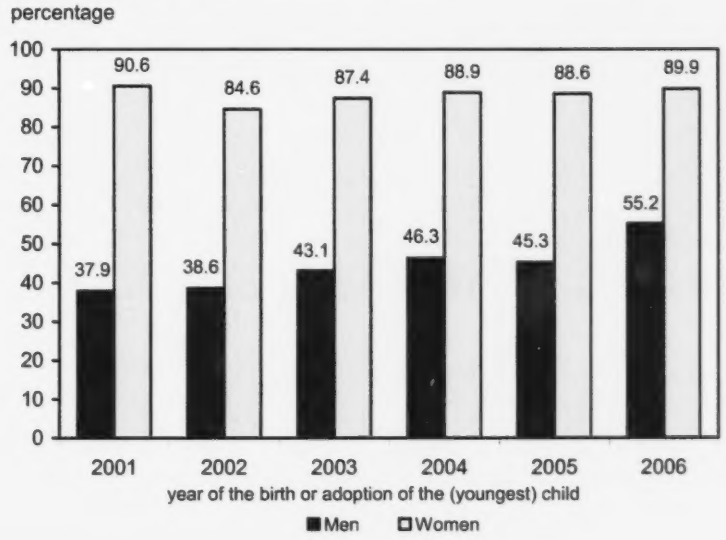
Among industrialized countries, the federal policy of one year of leave is one of the most generous in terms of duration. In December 2000, parental benefits increased from 10 to 35 weeks. As such, the total duration of maternity and parental leaves increased from six months to one year. While the benefits rate has remained unchanged (55% of weekly insurable earnings, up to an established maximum), the eligibility threshold went from 700 to 600 insurable work hours. More information is available on the Human Resources and Social Development Canada website (www.hrsdc-rhdsc.gc.ca).

Finally, a very small proportion of people flagged a few gaps in formal support services such as services not being offered in their region, their request for service being refused, waiting periods that were too long, or services that were too expensive.

More fathers are taking time off from work for the birth or adoption of a child

Policies regarding maternity and parental leaves have existed for a very long time and are established in over a hundred countries. Maternity policies were enacted to support the health and well-being of the mother and infant. Since the 1960s, these policies have gained increasing importance as more and more women have entered the labour market, particularly married women with young children. In Canada, 63% of women with children under the age of three worked outside the home in 2003 (Statistics Canada, 2004).

Chart 2
The proportion of fathers who took leave after the arrival of a child has increased since 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

According to the GSS, 65% of parents who were paid workers or self-employed before the birth or adoption of a child (between 2001 and 2006) took leave (paid or unpaid) from their job. The proportion of parents who took a leave of absence from work for a birth or an adoption was 61% in 2001, whereas this proportion was 70% for parents who had or adopted a child five years later.

Although the latest policy provisions are prompting more and more parents to benefit from parental leave, women are always more numerous in taking a leave of absence from work for a birth or adoption. In fact, 88% of mothers took a leave of absence from their jobs, compared with 45% of fathers who did so. This relatively high level of participation of fathers who are taking leave places Canada ahead of a number of countries, but ranks it well behind those where parents benefit from paid, non-transferable parental leave (each parent must use their leave or lose it) as in Sweden and Norway (Marshall, 2003).

Finally, revising the parental program seems to have worked, since the proportion of fathers who took leave following the arrival of a child has increased since 2001. While the proportion of mothers who took a leave of absence from work remained stable at nearly 90% between 2001 and 2006, the proportion of fathers who did so increased from 38% to 55% during the same period. This increase may be explained by the extended length of time offered for benefits (now that Canadian parents can receive up to 35 paid weeks of leave, mothers are perhaps more inclined to "share" some of the leave time with their spouse or

partner) and the federal program for choice regarding child care (effective since July 2006). It should be noted that the increase between 2005 and 2006 is largely related to the corresponding increase of fathers in Quebec who took leave to care for their child. Over this same time period, the proportion of fathers in Quebec who took such a leave went from 67% to 80%. We cannot discuss this increase without making reference to the new program of assistance to families (in place since January 1, 2006): the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan *(Institut de la statistique du Quebec, 2006).*

Financial reasons and working conditions are important reasons accounting for why some parents do not take leave for the birth or adoption of a child

According to the GSS, 35% of parents who were paid workers or self-employed before the birth or adoption of a child (between 2001 and 2006) did not take leave (paid or unpaid) from their job. Several reasons account for parents' decision not to take leave after the birth or adoption of a child.

Table 2
Financial and employment factors are among the most frequent reasons reported for not taking leave for the birth or adoption of a child

Reasons reported for not taking leave after the birth or adoption of a child[1]	
	percent
The financial situation did not allow it	42.9
Working conditions did not allow it	36.9
Did not want to compromise their career	24.5
No vacation time available	8.6
The employer did not accept the request	3.5 [E]
Other reason[2]	14.9

[E] use with caution

1. Includes persons who answered "yes" to the reason stated.
2. Other reasons, such as the spouse took the leave, or was already on leave for a second child, etc.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Financial and employment factors are among the most frequent reasons reported: approximately 4 out of 10 parents could not take such leave because their financial situation did not allow it. Next, 37% of parents account for this decision with reference to working conditions, which did not allow them to take a leave of absence.

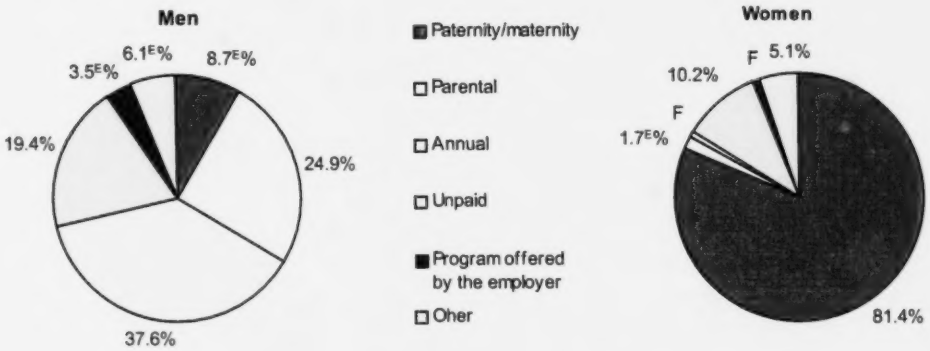
The years between 25 and 35 are the prime years for establishing a successful career. These are the years when professional efforts are usually the most profitable. Thus, professional demands may be incompatible with the task of caring for a child. Accordingly, the GSS shows that approximately 25% of parents reported that they preferred not to compromise their career.

The reasons reported for not taking leave after a birth or adoption differed according to the gender of the parent. Among men, factors related to finances, employment and career played a dominant role in the decision not to take leave following a birth or adoption. In fact, men (46%) were twice as likely as women to report that their financial situation did not allow them to take leave.

The large majority of mothers take maternity leave, whereas fathers take annual or parental leave

The type of leave taken varies according to the parent's gender. While the large majority of mothers who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006 took maternity leave (81%), very few fathers (9%[2]) took paternity leave. A quarter of fathers took parental leave to stay home and care for a child. Instead of paternity or parental leaves, fathers usually allot themselves a few days of vacation or other paid (or unpaid) personal leave. In fact, 38% of fathers drew on their annual leave to take time off work and 19% took unpaid leave. This may be because some organizations still show resistance towards requests from young fathers who want to get more involved in their new family (Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance, 2003).

Chart 3
The large majority of mothers take maternity leave, while fathers take annual or parental leave



E use with caution
F too unreliable to be published
Note: Only the percentage where the type of leave was known is indicated.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Fathers are more likely to return to work after taking time off for a birth or adoption

For some parents, returning to work after the birth or adoption of a child may prove difficult. It takes time to adjust to a new baby. Even if parents have more or less planned for everything, have found the best way to care for their child, and are in a hurry to return to work, the return still requires a period of adaptation. Parents must learn to reconcile the baby's needs with their desire to care for the child and the need to return to work.

According to the GSS, after a short or extended absence to care for a child between 2001 and 2006, 77% of parents returned to work. Fathers were more likely to do so: 9 in 10 fathers returned to work, compared with slightly more than 6 in 10 mothers.

Mothers take time off from work for a longer period of time than fathers after a pregnancy or an adoption

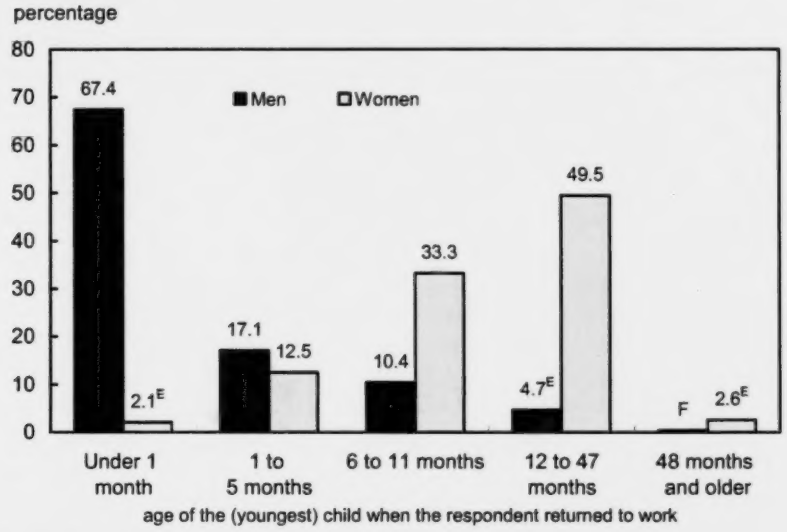
The timing for returning to work after a leave of absence for the birth or adoption of a child varies according to the parent's gender. According to the GSS, 85% of fathers who took leave of some kind to care for their child between 2001 and 2006 were off from work for less than six months. Of this proportion, more than two-thirds returned to work within a month following the child's birth or adoption.

2. Use with caution.

However, during the same period, mothers took leave from work for a longer period: nearly half of women returned to work within 12 to 47 months after the birth or adoption of the child. In addition, a third of mothers returned to work within 6 to 11 months.

Of course, the length of time and the type of leave taken to care for the child are related. Parents who returned to the labour market more quickly had taken annual or unpaid leave or had benefited from a program offered by the employer. In contrast, parents who stayed home longer to care for the child mostly benefited from maternity/paternity leave or parental leave.

Chart 4
Most fathers returned to work less than one month after the (youngest) child's arrival



E use with caution
F too unreliable to be published
Note: Only the percentage where the age of the (youngest) child when the respondent returned to work was known is indicated.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Financial reasons are an important factor in the decision to return to work after a birth or adoption

In addition to the type of leave taken for the birth or adoption of a child, other factors affect the reintegration of parents into the labour market. For some people, taking a leave of absence from work represents potentially significant income loss. According to the GSS, 79% of parents indicated that they returned to work for financial reasons. Additionally, more than half of parents reported that their career was important or cited their desire to return to work as a reason for returning to work.

Despite the improved support programs and services designed to enable a greater number of parents to take more time to care for their child, 36% of parents indicated that they returned to work because they feared losing their job. Some types of jobs still offer little flexibility regarding absences from work. This is particularly true of less secure, contractual, non-unionized and atypical jobs (Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille, 2004a). In a recent study conducted among persons who worked in small and medium sized firms in Quebec, fear of job loss due to repeated absences for family reasons emerged as a very real concern for parents (Ministère de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale et de la Famille, 2004b).

Table 3
A majority of parents returned to work for financial reasons

Reasons that prompted their return to work following the birth or adoption[1]	percent
Financial reasons	79.1
Career is important/wanted to return to work	56.6
Felt isolated being at home	35.9
Did not want to lose their job	16.4
Other reason[2]	9.9

1. Includes persons who answered "yes" to the reason stated.
2. Other reason, such as end of leave, employer request, etc.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

The reasons reported by men for returning to work were generally accorded the same importance by women. However, many more mothers indicated that they returned to work because they felt isolated at home (26%). This is related to the fact that mothers stay at home longer than do fathers to care for the child. Fathers seem more worried about the possibility of losing their job (40%).

In addition, many parents who return to work, particularly if they do so for financial or job security reasons, would like to take longer parental leaves. Among parents who returned to work, 81% indicate that they would have stayed home longer to care for the child if they could have afforded to. As well, of parents who took maternity or paternity leave, slightly more than 8 out of 10 parents would have extended their leave if benefits had been higher or offered for a longer period of time. Finally, among parents who took another type of leave (annual, unpaid, etc.), 65% indicated that they would have liked to have stayed home longer before returning to work.

Taking a leave of absence from work whether for a short or extended period can result in worse situations than lost income. A small proportion of parents indicate negative consequences associated with a leave of absence from work for parental reasons. Among parents who took time off to care for a child, 10% report having lost an opportunity for promotion and 8% mentioned that they had to retrain or take courses after returning to work. Approximately 7% of parents cited that they returned to a less desirable job assignment.

The large majority of parents report that they are satisfied with the transition between leave and return to work

The large majority of parents (86%) who took leave from work for parental reasons between 2001 and 2006 indicated that they were satisfied with the transition between leave and the return to work. The desire to stay home longer, family-work balance and specific, work-related problems are the main reasons cited by parents who were dissatisfied.

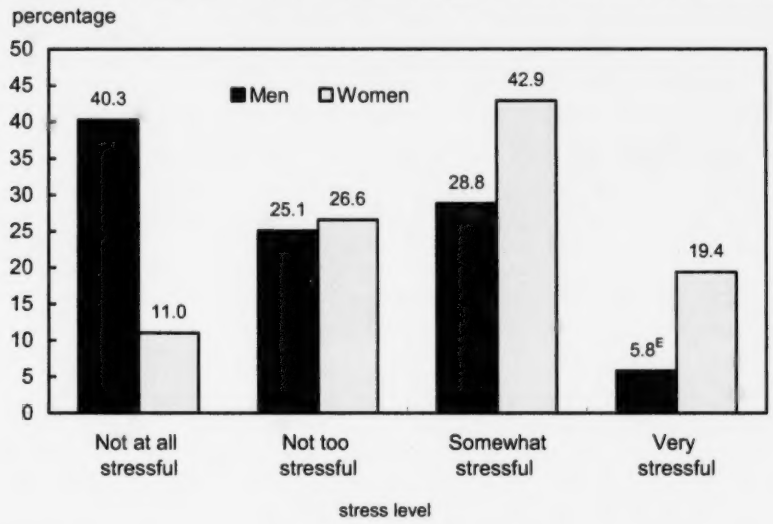
The transition is more stressful for mothers

At times, the demands and concerns of family life can bring their share of stress (Tremblay et al., 2006; Duxbury et al. 1994). If we add to this the stress involved in returning to work, parents may sometimes feel irritated or anxious. Schedules are often very heavy and working parents have more trouble finding time to enjoy themselves as a family.

While most fathers rated the transition between leave and the return to work as being not too stressful or even not at all stressful, the situation is entirely different for mothers. In fact, 62% of mothers indicated that the transition between leave and returning to work was stressful. Of this proportion, 19% described this transition as being very stressful. Mothers often have to make the most compromises in balancing their responsibilities: they are more likely to step out from the labour force or to request temporary leaves of absence and devote more time to household work (Lapierre-Adamcyk et al., 2006; Pacaut et al., 2006; Marshall, 2006).

Despite numerous measures implemented by government to support parents, concerns persist, particularly with regard to accommodating professional and family schedules. The GSS reveals that nearly half of parents mentioned work-family balance as a primary source of stress associated with their return to work. Then follow concerns related to the family (20%), to work (12%) and child care (12%).

Chart 5
The transition between leave and returning to work: more stressful for mothers



E use with caution
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Some parents do not return to work after a birth or adoption because they want to raise their children themselves

Of course, not all parents return to work following a leave of absence. Approximately 23% of parents who took leave between 2001 and 2006 for parental reasons did not return to work. For a majority of parents who stayed at home, their decision was motivated by a desire to raise their child themselves (54%). Many parents also report staying at home due to a subsequent or intended pregnancy.

Next, nearly 24% of parents did not return to work for financial reasons, with child care services being too expensive. These parents were likely to be working part-time and to have accumulated less professional seniority in their current job (Marshall, 1999). Once child care fees are subtracted from their income, these parents are perhaps less inclined to return to work for financial reasons.

Professional reasons were cited by 8% of parents who were unable to return to their job, because their employer had not offered the position they were seeking or they lost their job.

Summary

This section was based on parents who had or adopted a child between 2001 and 2006. The analysis carried out provides information about the use (and non use) of services and programs involved in the parental experience as well as absences from work for a pregnancy or an adoption. The results presented require more in-depth exploration through supplementary analysis in order to examine in more detail the dynamics of parenthood. Such an exploration could, for example, include an analysis of workplace supports (daycare services, schedule flexibility) or even the structure of employment (work status, nature of employment, unionization).

Section 2: Navigating couple dissolution

The creation and growth of a family through the birth or adoption of a child (see Section 1) is one of many transition points in the evolution of family life where support systems may come into play. At the other end of the spectrum, when a family structure is dissolved through separation or divorce, couples and families may also need support for navigating through the changes involved. With the growing instability of unions in Canada, with the increasing prevalence of common-law arrangements, and with a growing complexity in the conjugal histories of Canadians in general (Statistics Canada, 2002a; Gentleman and Park, 1997), the transitions involved in separation and divorce may present new challenges for families and for the policies and programs designed to support them.

In working through separation or divorce, former partners of both marriages and common-law unions need to make myriad arrangements concerning their finances, their living quarters and, for some, the custody and care of their children. It is a time when persons may potentially need expert input from lawyers and financial advisors, or the emotional support of personal and family counselling. This section examines the types of programs and services that recently separated and divorced Canadians used to help themselves and their children through the transition. More specifically, it examines the extent to which legal, social, and other support services were used by those who experienced the dissolution of a union between 2001 and 2006, either in the form of a common-law separation, a marital separation or a divorce.

According to the General Social Survey (GSS), just under 2.0 million persons went through a separation or divorce between 2001 and 2006. Approximately half of these persons separated or divorced from a marriage and half separated from a common-law relationship. Sixty-nine percent were facing these events for the first time in their lives. Approximately 4 in 10 had dependent children (see Definitions). A more detailed demographic picture of separation and divorce is provided below. This is followed by a look at how different demographic groups made use of formal programs and services for navigating couple dissolution.

Box 4

Definitions

Who was included as recently separated or divorced in this study?

This study looked at persons aged 15 and over who had experienced a separation or a divorce of their couple relationship between 2001 and 2006. The focus on this time frame by the 2006 General Social Survey permitted the analysis of relatively recent events, while allowing for the fact that working through a separation or divorce is a process that can take several years. The sample size was 2,255.

The term separation has no legal meaning in this article. It is used simply to define the end of a relationship resulting from causes other than death. Recently separated persons included those who had left a marriage but who had not divorced, and those coming out of a common-law relationship. Common-law relationships are self-reported in this study and may refer to unions of any duration. Recently divorced persons included all those who were divorced between 2001 and 2006, whether they had been initially separated from that union within this same time frame or whether their initial separation occured prior to this reference period. It also included those who did not have a separation period prior to their divorce.

What is meant by persons with dependent children in this study?

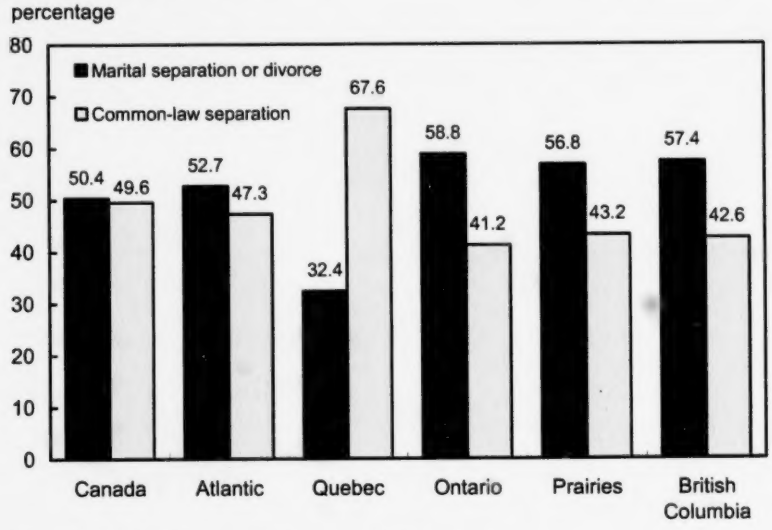
A recently separated or divorced person was considered to have dependent children if they had any biological or adopted children with a former spouse or common-law partner and the children were under the age of 23 at the time of the survey. This survey coverage allowed for the inclusion of all parents whose children were under 18 at the time of separations and divorces occurring up to five years prior to the time of the survey.

The frequency of common-law break-ups is on par with marriage dissolutions

Between 2001 and 2006, just over 1.0 million Canadians ended a marriage, either through separation or divorce. The number of persons who left a common-law relationship in this time period was almost the same, at just under 1.0 million. While married couples are far more numerous in Canada than common-law relationships (Statistics Canada, 2002b), these data reflect the higher probability of break-up among common-law relationships compared to marriages (Statistics Canada, 2002a). In addition, it was found that persons in recently-ended common-law relationships had stayed together for an average of 4.3 years, 10 years less that the average duration for recently-ended marriages of 14.3 years.

The rising prevalence of common-law arrangements has been particularly evident in Québec (Statistics Canada, 2002a). Accordingly, the proportion of persons having recently experienced common-law separations rather than marital dissolution was much larger in Québec than in other regions of Canada (Chart 6). Sixty-eight percent of persons going through a union dissolution in Québec were ending a common-law union and only 32% were dissolving a marriage. In other regions of Canada, marital dissolution was more prevalent than common-law break-ups.

Chart 6
Quebec is distinguished by a larger proportion of persons experiencing common-law break-ups



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Demographic differences between persons ending marital unions and those leaving common-law relationships may point to potentially different needs for these groups in navigating through their couple dissolution. Differences between these groups were found in the age at separation or divorce, in the presence of dependent children, and in the ages of these children (Table 4).

Almost 6 in 10 common-law partners broke up under the age of 30 and approximately 7 in 10 had no dependent children with their former common-law partner. Where there were children involved, the youngest tended to be very young, under the age of six. This contrasts with those who were separated or divorced from a marriage, where former partners were much more likely to be in their 30s, 40s and older, and where greater proportions had dependent children. Almost half of those who had divorced and nearly 6 in 10 of those who had separated without divorce had dependent children. Where children were involved in a marital dissolution, they tended to be older than their counterparts from common-law break-ups. This was especially true for marital dissolutions ending in divorce.

Table 4

Persons going through common-law separations are younger and less likely to have children

	Total - Separation or divorce	Marital separation, without divorce	Divorce	Common-law separation
		percent		
Age at time of separation or divorce				
15 to 29	35.8	14.6 [E]	12.3	58.3
30 to 44	39.4	47.5	49.6	30.0
45 and over	24.9	37.9	38.1	11.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Dependent children with former spouse or common-law partner				
Yes	41.1	58.6	48.5	29.1
No	58.9	41.4	51.5	70.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age of youngest child, for those with dependent children only				
Under 6	35.4	32.9	19.0	54.1
6 to 14	42.4	44.4	49.0	34.0
15 to 22	22.2	22.7	32.0	11.8 [E]
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

[E] use with caution

Note: Cells may not always add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

In addition to these contrasting profiles, persons leaving marriages and common-law unions had differing levels of experience with break-up, depending on their age group (Table 5). For most persons who faced marriage dissolution, navigating this transition was new territory. As would be expected, this was especially the case for younger persons leaving a marriage. Younger individuals ending a common-law union resembled their counterparts leaving marriages, with a majority going through dissolution for the first time in their lives. However, for individuals who left a common-law relationship at the age of 35 or older, the opposite was true, with a majority having already experienced union dissolution at some point in the past.

Lawyers and counselling are the most widely used services for working through couple dissolution

These demographic portraits of the recently separated and divorced give rise to many questions about the extent to which various groups make use of programs and services for working through this life transition. Do persons exiting marriages have different requirements for services than those ending common-law relationships? What types of programs and services does each of these groups use to help themselves and their children through the changes of separation or divorce? Are there particular demographic characteristics connected to low levels of contact with formal services?

Table 5

Older common-law partners much more likely to have experienced previous break-up than their counterparts leaving a marriage

	Marital separation or divorce			Common-law separation		
	Total - All ages[1]	15 to 34	35 and over	Total - All ages[1]	15 to 34	35 and over
			percent			
First separation or divorce	73.8	83.5	70.4	65.0	79.0	31.8
Had previous union dissolution	26.2	16.5 [E]	29.6	35.0	21.0	68.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

[E] use with caution

1. Age at time of separation or divorce.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

According to the GSS, 57% of all persons who recently separated or divorced made use of one or more formal services to work through their transition (Table 6). The services of a lawyer were the most commonly used, by 44% of separated and divorced persons. Alternative Dispute Resolution was utilized by 14%. Alternative Dispute Resolution involves professional services such as mediation and conciliation which are available as an alternative to the court system. They are intended to help separating and divorcing persons resolve conflict and make decisions in a collaborative manner (Department of Justice Canada, 2006). Among those who used Alternative Dispute Resolution, 74% also consulted with a lawyer.

Social support services were used by 30% of the recently separated and divorced, the most common service being counseling. Very few persons, only 5%, made use of a financial service. Individuals who did not use any formal program or service at all constituted a substantial minority of 43%.

Table 6

Nearly 6 in 10 use formal services to navigate break-up

Type of program or service used	Recently separated or divorced persons
	percent
Used at least one program or service of any kind	56.8
At least one legal or alternative service	48.0
Lawyer, including legal aid or duty counsel (for self or children)	43.7
Conciliation, mediation or other Alternative Dispute Resolution service	13.5
Family law information centre	8.1
At least one social support service	29.8
Counselling (for self or children)	27.0
Parent education or information sessions[1]	9.6
Community resource centre for referrals or support groups	7.6
At least one other service	7.5
Financial service	4.5
Another program or service	3.4
Did not use any program or service	43.2

1. This percentage is based on those with children only.

Note: Any given respondent may have used multiple services.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

The majority of common-law partners do not use formal services during separation

The use of formal services for separation and divorce varied substantially by the type of union dissolution involved (Table 7). Sixty-five percent of those who left a common-law relationship between 2001 and 2006 did not make use of any formal program or service in the process of breaking-up. In contrast, those leaving marriages were much more likely to make use of services, including 69% of the recently separated and 82% of the recently divorced. As would be expected, those having had a divorce were the most frequent users of legal services and their alternatives (76%) compared with just 25% of individuals who left a common-law union. The rate of social support service use was approximately 4 in 10 for those leaving a marriage, through either separation or divorce, compared with just 18% for individuals dissolving a common-law relationship.

Table 7

Persons leaving common-law relationships less likely to use services

	Persons who experienced		
Type of program or service used	Marital separation, without divorce	Divorce	Common-law separation
		percent	
Used at least one program or service of any kind	68.7	82.1	35.1
At least one legal or alternative service	58.2	76.0	25.3
At least one social support service	42.1	38.8	18.5
Did not use any program or service	31.3	17.9	64.9

Note: Any given respondent may have used multiple services.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Regions differ in their use of social support services

Use of services differed somewhat across regions of Canada, with the Prairies showing the highest proportion of users overall (Table 8). Despite the relatively high prevalence of persons leaving common-law unions in Québec compared to other provinces, and the low usage of services associated with such break-ups, persons in Québec used legal services and their alternatives at about the same rate as other regions of Canada. In fact, Québec had the largest proportion of persons who made use of Alternative Dispute Resolution services. Twenty-two percent used services such as mediation and conciliation in Québec, compared to only 11% in other provinces. More in keeping with patterns of common-law break-ups, Québec showed the lowest proportion of social support service users (21%). British Columbia reported the highest (39%).

Table 8

Regions differ in use of social support services: highest proportion of users in British Columbia, lowest proportion in Quebec

	Region				
Type of program or service used	Atlantic	Quebec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
			percent		
Used at least one program or service of any kind	56.1	52.3	58.8	60.8	55.9
At least one legal or alternative service	45.4	46.5	49.5	50.8	44.8
At least one social support service	28.8	20.9	30.9	34.8	39.3
Did not use any program or service	43.9	47.7	41.2	39.2	44.1

Note: Any given respondent may have used multiple services.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Being young or less educated are potential barriers to service use

Two particular groups who used services much less than others were persons under the age of 30 and those with less than a high school diploma (Table 9). A much smaller percentage of these groups used services of any kind, including legal and social support services, compared to other groups. It should be noted that young persons were less likely to use services regardless of whether they were leaving a marriage or a common-law relationship.

The GSS also showed that a somewhat greater proportion of women than men made use of both legal and social support services.

Table 9
Persons under 30 and those with less than a high school diploma are less likely to use services

	Use of any program or service	Use of legal program or service	Use of social support program or service
		percent	
Sex			
Men	52.6	44.6	25.7
Women	60.2	50.8	33.0
Age at time of separation or divorce			
15 to 29	31.7	23.3	14.8
30 to 44	70.1	59.1	40.6
45 and over	68.6	62.4	32.5
Highest level of schooling			
Some elementary/secondary or none	41.9	34.0	16.5 [E]
High school diploma	56.8	49.5	24.3
Post secondary education	59.2	49.9	33.4

[E] use with caution

Note: Any given respondent may have used multiple services.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Those with children are more likely to use services

Persons who had dependent children with an ex-spouse or ex-common-law partner were much more likely to use every type of service – legal, social, and other services – than those without dependent children (Table 10). Overall, 74% of individuals with dependent children used a formal service of some kind, compared to only 45% of those who separated or divorced without dependent children.

Among those with dependent children who did not use any formal programs or services at all in navigating their break-up, about one in five[3] reported that they did not know that such programs or services existed. Among those who were aware of services, 73% felt that they did not need any help.

Legal involvement in making arrangements for children varies

During separation or divorce, parents face the challenges of trying to arrange for the sustained financial well-being of their children, establishing new living arrangements for them, and ensuring a suitable

3. Use with caution.

approach to major decision-making about the children's health, religion and education. Among those who had recently separated or divorced with dependent children, 80% currently had an arrangement of some kind with their ex-partner regarding their children. Sixty-four percent had agreements for support or maintenance payments for their children, 62% for the amount of time children spent with each parent, and 61% for who makes major decisions for the children. Each of these types of agreements involved different degrees of legal involvement (Table 11).

Table 10

Those with dependent children are more likely to use services

Type of program or service used	Persons with dependent children	Persons without dependent children
	percent	
Used at least one program or service of any kind	74.0	44.7
At least one legal or alternative service	65.7	35.5
At least one social support service	43.1	20.2
At least one other service	10.4	5.4
Did not use any program or service	26.0	55.3

Note: Any given respondent may have used multiple services.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Table 11

Financial arrangements for children are the most likely to involve legal system

Degree of legal involvement in creation of agreement or arrangement	Type of agreement or arrangement		
	Financial support for children	Time spent with children	Major decisions for children
	percent		
Verbal arrangement or written by ex-partners on their own	34.3	45.8	56.8
Written with lawyer	23.3	21.1	16.0
Written with court service such as mediation or conciliation	20.7	19.1 [E]	12.2
Judge-ordered, as outcome of hearing or trial	26.6	22.4 [E]	17.5

[E] use with caution

Note: Some respondents have multiple responses where arrangements for different children involved different degrees of legal involvement. Thus, percentages do not add up to 100.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Financial arrangements for children were the most likely to involve legal input, either from a lawyer, court services such as mediation, or from a hearing or a trial with a judge. Even so, 34% of financial support arrangements for children were based on verbal agreements or on written agreements made without legal counsel. The highest proportion of arrangements made without legal involvement were those around major decision-making for children (57%). Agreements around physical custody and the time spent with children fell somewhere in-between on the spectrum of legal involvement, with 46% being established without any legal input.

Separated and divorced persons with dependent children who had used a lawyer during the years 2005-2006 were asked to assess their services. When rating their helpfulness in terms of improving the way they and their ex-partner dealt with issues related to their children, such as arrangements, visitations, or financial support, 62% found lawyers to be very helpful or somewhat helpful. Ratings of general satisfaction were higher, with 78% of parents reporting that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the assistance they received from a lawyer. Of those who were dissatisfied, the most common issues raised were high costs and slow progress.

Potential barriers in making arrangements for children were also examined. Among those who reported having no financial arrangements for the support of their children, the main reasons given included parental conflict and problems (30%), a lack of need or desire for it (22%), and situations with equal custody or where expenses are worked out amicably or as needed (20%). The reasons for having no arrangement for time spent with children included children being old enough to decide for themselves or living elsewhere (25%) and a preference for an informal, ad hoc approach (21%). Finally, for those who had no agreement regarding who makes major decisions about the children, the most common reasons noted were an absent or uninvolved parent (21%) and, once again, the preference for an informal, ad hoc approach (14%)[4].

Summary

A mix of factors linked to use of services through separation and divorce

In this new millenium, the frequency of common-law break-ups in Canada is on par with marriage dissolutions. In working through these transitions in couple and family life, individuals leaving common-law unions show much less use of formal legal services and social support programs compared to their counterparts leaving marriages. Issues of age and education may be other factors which keep the recently separated and divorced away from formal sources of help. For those making arrangements for dependent children, a sizable number have no formal agreement in place. Parents report a mix of factors that come into play when trying to arrange for the financial support of their children, time spent with children and decision-making responsibilities. These findings all point to potential complexities for today's families in navigating the changes of separation and divorce.

Conclusion

Navigating family transitions in the new millenium

This analysis provided information about the transitions experienced by persons who had or adopted children as well as those who separated or divorced between 2001 and 2006. Regardless of the type of transition experienced, this survey allowed for the examination of services requested by people during significant events in their lives, whether happy or difficult.

One of the main findings of the study is that a notable proportion of parents used formal services put in place by governments and institutions to support the parental experience. Conversely, the majority of parents reported that they did not use formal services or support because they had no need to do so. In other words, parents choose from a range of services related to the child's arrival and use the ones that fit their needs.

Although the latest policy provisions are prompting more and more fathers to take parental leave, women are still more likely to take time off from work after a birth or adoption. Nonetheless, the proportion of fathers having taken a leave of some kind for the birth or adoption of a child increased between 2001 and 2006. While mothers take maternity leave, fathers usually allot themselves a few days of vacation or other paid or unpaid personal leave. With respect to parents who were unable to benefit from time off from work to care for their child, factors related to finances and employment figured among the reasons cited most often.

Whether short or extended, the leave of absence to care for a child between 2001 and 2006, the majority of parents returned to work. Most fathers returned to work within a month of the child's birth or adoption, mothers on the other hand took more time off, on average 6 months to 2 years.

4. Use with caution.

The second part of the analysis on separation and divorce showed that parents of dependent children are among those who are likely to make use of formal programs and services during a couple break-up. Parents reported mixed results as they tried to make arrangements for their children in the aftermath of separation and divorce. While a majority had agreements for child support, residential custody, or major decision-making for children, a sizable number did not. Many decided to work out these arrangements between themselves, without lawyers, judges or other professionals. Non-users were sometimes unaware of services, but most declared that they did not need any. Still others were prevented from finding solutions as a result of persistent conflict with their former partners or dealing with an absent or uninvolved parent.

These many scenarios point to the complexities of separation and divorce for today's families. Socio-demographic findings also indicate important group differences in the experience of separation and divorce in Canada, especially for the growing numbers of persons leaving common-law unions. A broad range of family needs has been portrayed, suggesting important challenges for navigating transitions in the new millenium.

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